PAGE BROS. BUILDING

177-91 North State Street

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
Originally submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
in May, 1975
Revised November, 1982

From *North Loop Guidelines for Conservation and Redevelopment,* approved by the City Council of Chicago in October, 1981:

> The North Loop Redevelopment Project is one of the largest renewal projects of its kind proposed for any city in the United States. . . .
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> The North Loop has been studied as a potential renewal area for more than a decade. It was identified in 1973 by the Chicago Central Area Committee in the Chicago 21 Plan as a part of the Central Business District in which major redevelopment could and should be initiated. . . .
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> Several of the existing structures within the project area are likely to be designated as official City of Chicago landmarks by the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks. The Commission, together with the Department of Planning, will develop the standards to be used as the basis for the review of rehabilitation or reuse potential for these or other structures to be retained. . . .

The subject building is one of those currently under consideration by the Landmarks Commission for possible recommendation to the City Council for official landmark designation.

PAGE BROS. BUILDING

177-191 North State Street
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: John Mills Van Osdel

Completed: 1872

The Page Brothers Building is the last remaining cast-iron front building in Chicago. The use of iron in construction has a long history, but not until the late eighteenth century was it systematically employed as a structural material. Techniques for its economical mass production were developed, first in England, that allowed for its widespread use. Bridge engineers were among the first to exploit its potential. Iron was also used as an internal structural material for posts and beams in commercial structures. In the middle of the nineteenth century, iron began to appear in combination with glass on the exterior of buildings such as greenhouses and exhibition halls. The iron members formed a flexible grid into which panes of glass sheathing were set. These exposition buildings, of which the 1851 Crystal Palace in London was the most eminent, were temporary but very influential. The potential of iron, its malleability which permitted a variety of stylistic appearances, and its suitability for manufacture through industrial processes, was rapidly being recognized.

The Development of Cast-Iron in America

In America the casting of iron building parts for use in growing cities began in New York City in 1840 when James Bogardus, an inventor, returned from England where he had examined the new technology. Another New Yorker, Daniel D. Badger, a manufacturer of cast iron, began producing building fronts in 1850. Cast-iron fronts were facades applied to buildings constructed in the traditional manner with masonry load-bearing walls and interior supporting columns. Prefabricated window sections were stacked vertically and aligned horizontally to create a facade with wider openings than

details, and as cast-iron facades proliferated in American cities, fronts in various historic revival styles appeared.

Mimicking the styles of masonry architecture, cast-iron fronts were popular from the 1850s to the 1870s. Compared to masonry, cast iron was light in weight and could be erected more quickly. Lacking tensile strength, iron facade segments were limited in width to window units which were generally repeated uniformly across the entire structure. Cast iron was thought to be a fireproof material, good for dense urban centers, until the Chicago Fire of 1871 demonstrated that cast-iron could burn and melt. After the fire, although buildings with cast-iron fronts were constructed in Chicago's central business district, the technique began to lose its appeal. As development pressures in the business district increased, a new use of iron, and later steel, would radically alter building technology by allowing the construction of tall buildings supported entirely by their metal framework.

Cast Iron in Chicago

The Page Brothers Building is an important source for examining this transformation in architecture which took place largely in Chicago. The first cast-iron fronts erected in Chicago were designed by John Mills Van Osdel in 1856. The cast iron was supplied by Daniel D. Badger's New York firm, Architectural Iron Works. By the end of 1857, twelve such structures had been built in Chicago, principally along Lake Street, at that time Chicago's main street. These iron fronts were usually five stories in height with a cast-iron front wall and masonry side and back walls. The first story of the facade was composed of wide expanses of glass with intervening cast-iron columns supporting the upper floors. This arrangement of glass and iron columns on the ground floor was used with masonry fronts as well, cast-iron columns having been introduced into Chicago as early as 1848 or 1850.

A substantial number of iron fronts were built along Lake Street which, from Chicago's inception as a city, held the most prominent position due to its proximity to the river. It was here that Chicago's early commercial enterprises began. State Street was described as "narrow, shoddy, and unpromising. Small shops and shanties edged wooden sidewalks and unpaved streets." In 1867, Potter Palmer bought a three-quarter mile stretch of land along State Street and began to promote the street. In a few years he succeeded in having the street widened; building a hotel on it; and he convinced Field, Leiter and Company to leave Lake Street by building them a new store. Within a few years after the fire, State Street had won the competition by attracting the mercantile enterprises of the city away from Lake Street, but not before this street had been rebuilt with a magnificent display of cast-iron facades.

As a building material, cast iron had to compete with brick and stone. The generally higher cost of iron and the caprice of fashion pretty much put an end to the use of iron fronts here within a few years of their introduction. However, cast iron continued to be used extensively for interior supporting members, both as columns and beams.

These cast-iron buildings, touted as being fireproof, were destroyed along with their masonry and frame neighbors by the fire of 1871. Chicago architect Peter B. Wight explained:

> . . .the popular opinion was that they could not burn, and that to such an extent the buildings on which they were used were fire-proof. Hence, when several such buildings in New York were burned, and the fronts fell down flat on their faces in the street, the average newspaper reporter was greatly nonplussed and befogged in his graphic descriptions, and wondered how iron buildings could be burned. . . .They are simply incombustible buildings so far as iron and bricks are used in them. They are combustible just so far as wood is used in them. When the wood is in sufficient quantities to soften and melt the iron, they are destructible buildings, and of the worst kind. When they burn, the destruction is almost absolute. . . .

After the fire, architects once more employed cast-iron fronts in rebuilding Chicago. Within one year after the fire over twenty of them had been erected. John Mills Van Osdel remained the chief architect using cast-iron fronts. A new Lake Street was rapidly rebuilt which could boast of whole block-long sections of cast-iron fronts. These buildings in most instances replaced burnt-out iron fronts and were developed by the same men who had built the original ones in the 1850s.

The Page Brothers Building

Stiles Burton's redevelopment of the "Old City Hotel Block" site (southeast corner of State and Lake streets) as a five-story cast-iron front is the only surviving example of this type of construction in Chicago. John Mills Van Osdel, as recorded in his account books, designed Burton's building in 1872. The manufacture of the architectural cast iron was by Daniel Badger at a cost of $15,700. Before the building was completed, it was leased out to Page Brothers and Company, a leather goods firm. The architecture of the entire block, both pre- and post-fire, was chiefly the work of Van Osdel.

The Page Brothers Building is a typical Italiante cast-iron front building in which the dominant feature is the repetition of window bays. Although some of its ornamental details have been removed over the years, its essential elements are intact. Each wide double-hung window has a flattened arch defined by narrow molding with small decorative brackets centered in each arch and paired between windows. Large double brackets originally marked the corners of the facade at each floor, and a stringcourse ran beneath each band of windows. In keeping with the Italianate character of the facade, a bracketed cornice finished the Lake Street facade. The State Street front, of secondary importance, was a load-bearing brick wall with narrow double-hung windows, plain stone lintels above each window, and a decorative brick parapet. Both the Lake

and State facades contained storefronts consisting of large windows separated by cast-iron columns. On the State Street side the storefronts were only at the south end of the structure.

Burton's building underwent a remodeling in the 1890s, when Lake Street declined in importance as State Street became the city's primary commercial thoroughfare. Later known as the Loop End Building, the Page Brothers' State Street facade was removed and replaced with a new facade containing large windows. A sixth story was added to the structure, and a new cornice, extending across both the State and Lake sides, was created. Subsequent alterations included the removal of the stringcourses, corner brackets, small brackets between windows, and saw several different first-floor arrangements. On the Lake Street facade today, the original cast iron remains on the second through fifth floors.

The use of cast-iron fronts in Chicago was limited to two brief periods: 1856-57 and in the first two years after the fire. The Page Brothers Building is a unique example in Chicago of this type of construction. It recalls the early development of the city along Lake Street, a time when the river was a major transportation route, and Lake Street, was the main commercial street of the community. John M. Van Osdel, who designed the Page Brothers Building, was the city's first professional architect. His career in Chicago began in 1837, and by the time of his death in 1891, he had designed seventy-three major structures in the city. The Page Brothers Building, despite the alterations to its State Street facade, which was never intended to be its main facade, is a good example of the commercial architecture of the period around the time of the fire; it is one of few buildings remaining in the downtown area to represent that era. In combination with the internationally significant buildings of the central business district, the Page Brothers Building helps provide a cross-section of architectural achievement. As an exemplar of cultural, economic, and architectural history of Chicago, the Page Brothers Building is an important landmark in the Loop.

OPPOSITE:

An engraving of the Page Brothers Building appeared in in the January, 1873 issue of *The Land Owner,* a real estate publication. Both the cast-iron Lake Street facade and the brick State Street side, each with its storefront windows, are depicted.

(Courtesy of Chicago Historical Society)

Building Erected by Stiles Burton on the site of the old City Hotel, and Occupied by Page Bros. & Co., Cor. Lake and State Sts., Chicago.

OPPOSITE:

The Lake Street facade of the Page Brothers Building retains most of its original cast-iron features, despite alterations which included the addition of a sixth floor and a new cornice.

(Bob Thall, photographer)


TO START YOUR BEAUTY COURSE
State/Lake
LUCKY STRIKES AGAIN
THE MOMENT IS RIGHT FOR IT.
MRS FAY

OPPOSITE:

Windows in cast-iron facades could be larger than those in load-bearing masonry walls.

(Bob Thall, photographer)


TO
START
YOUR
BEAUTY COURSE
FOR
HAIR DRYERS
COSMETICS
BEAUTY

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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